BETWEEN THE OLD WORLD AND THE NEW: C.F. VOLNEY AND THE POLITICS OF TRAVEL WRITING IN FRANCE, 1782-1803

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Depictions of the wider world have always been important to the self-understanding of Europeans. During the course of the eighteenth century, however, the process of gathering information about other people and places gained new importance for both the geo-political projects of European states and their intellectual culture. The growing administrative apparatus of governing regimes, together with a burgeoning and increasingly organised scientific community, fed both the demand and supply sides of this process. This period marked a new phase of systematic voyaging in Europe, symbolised by a nexus of science and commerce, philosophy and imperial aspiration. At the same time voyage literature grew in popularity, range and ambition. Its practitioners came to conceive it as an important vehicle for philosophical reflection and, occasionally, political critique.

The advent of the French Revolution in 1789 did little to alter this. Despite the turbulence of the Revolutionary years, and the pressures of war, the imperial and commercial utility of voyagers to the French state did not cease with the change of government. Nor did many of the intellectual debates which had animated travel literature for generations. During the Revolution, as before, accounts of distant lands and peoples

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offered material for reflection upon issues of human unity and diversity, the merits of alternative modes of life, even the nature and history of the human species. The Revolution did, however, leave an imprint upon both voyagers and the literature they produced. As the context in which voyages were conceived, conducted and narrated changed—often at dizzying speed—voyagers responded to the opportunities and exigencies of their situation, and the stakes in ongoing debates changed with political circumstance. The history of French voyaging during this period, therefore, is a story of both continuity and change. Yet the elements of each are not always easy to disentangle, and the precise role of the Revolutionary conjuncture can be difficult to assess amidst the broader social, intellectual and imperial dynamics that affected the evolution of European voyaging in this era.

This article explores the interaction between Revolutionary history and the French practice of voyaging using a case study. The chosen example is the ‘philosophe-voyager’ Constantin-François Volney (1757-1820). Volney’s particular utility for considering issues of this kind is that he is one of the few French travellers to have conducted voyages, and published accounts, both before and during the Revolutionary conjuncture. The first, a voyage to North Africa and the Levant undertaken in the early 1780s, culminated in the publication of a *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte* (1787). This work made the author’s reputation. Although Volney would become a controversial figure during the Revolution, particularly for his religious views, his book was held up as an example of ‘scientific’ and ‘philosophical’ travel literature that others should seek to emulate. In France it was lauded by the savants, and the generals, who participated in Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign of 1798. It was widely read abroad by figures as diverse as Catherine the Great, Alexander Humboldt and Thomas Malthus. It became, for a time, a paradigmatic text for many who sought a model to integrate the geographical and social observations of voyagers into the formation of a unified ‘science of man’.

(4) Louis-Alexandre Berthier claimed the book was « the guide of the French in Egypt, the only one which never misled them ». Adolphe BOSSANGE, « Notice sur Volney », dans Constantin-François VOLNEY, Œuvres de Volney, Adolphe BOSSANGE (dir.), Paris, Bossange, 1825, v. I, p. IV. All translations from French texts in this article are my own.

As the quest for such a science gathered pace, during the latter years of the Revolutionary era, Volney was well positioned to further this program. Closely connected, both socially and professionally, with figures such as Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis and Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy who sought a social science to guide republican government under the rubric of ‘idéologie’, Volney was the first figure nominated by the Directory to sit in the Class of Political and Moral Science in the newly created Institut National. In 1795 he produced a pamphlet for the Commission des Relations Extérieures which was widely distributed across French diplomatic and bureaucratic networks. Based upon a schematised version of the questions that had framed Volney’s earlier oriental voyage, the pamphlet invited all servants of the French state abroad to gather data on the physical and political situation of countries they visited. It sought to procure information about climate, topography, agriculture, commerce, government, laws, religion, manners and culture. The goal was to analyse relationships between these things with the ultimate aim of establishing the possibilities, and procedures, for promoting individual and collective progress.

Volney did not, however, remain in Paris to pursue his career through the era of the Directory. In July 1795 he departed for the newly formed United States of America, where he remained for three years, considering permanent immigration until he was forced to return by rising tensions between the two countries. The textual product of this voyage was published in 1803 as the Tableau du climat et sol des États-Unis. Both the voyage itself, and the moment of its publication, reflected periods of disillusionment for Volney. Notwithstanding his political elevation after Thermidor, he was deeply scarred by the Terror, during which he had been imprisoned. His voyage account, compiled after his return to France, appeared as the French Republic was turning itself into an Empire. Having

been at one time a supporter and confidante of Napoleon, this too was a time of crisis for the author.

Volney’s two voyages are products of different historical moments. Each was shaped by multiple factors, ranging from the author’s political biography to the inevitable contingency of experience abroad. The two books deal with different regions of the world and this naturally affects their contents. The second book was also only a partial fulfilment of its author’s original design. Yet juxtaposing these two works still allows us to compare the practice and sensibility of a single voyager across the Revolutionary ‘rupture’. It allows us to track Volney’s passage from the ‘old world’ to a self-proclaimed ‘new world’, not just geographically but also chronologically. When we follow that passage we can see both striking continuities and significant transformations. Together these suggest, I will argue, that Revolutionary voyaging was not always more ‘revolutionary’, philosophically or politically, than the voyaging that preceded 1789.

The foundations for Volney’s career as a voyager are in many ways obscure. He lacked the typical background of most late-eighteenth-century voyagers employed by the state – the military, astronomy or natural history. Born in Anjou, within a family of moderately successful bourgeois lawyers, he developed an early interest in oriental languages and history as a product, according to some who knew him, of a precocious hostility to the dogmatism of his priestly instructors9. By the time he arrived in Paris in his early 20s he had begun to study Hebrew and he soon enrolled in courses in Arabic and medicine10. He also began to frequent some of the most radical philosophical salons of the era – including that of the infamous infidel Baron d’Holbach and that of Madame Helvétius, widow of the philosopher, at Auteuil11. This combined interest in history, physiology and the downfall of organised religion would characterise Volney’s thought throughout his life.

Volney’s motives for his voyage to North Africa and the Levant have been a topic of some debate. He claimed in his book to be an independent traveller, interested in the lands that had given birth to ‘those religious ideas which still influence so powerfully (...) our social state’12. Yet he arrived with a letter of introduction from someone high in the French

(10) Ibid., p. 21, 32.
(11) Ibid., p. 35.
consular network, and it is clear that he had knowledge of French strategic ambitions in the region\(^{13}\). He spent nearly a year in Egypt and almost two in Syria, a province of the Ottoman Empire that at that time included most of the modern territories of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan. He travelled, as he would always travel, as a lone voyager, with occasional assistance from local guides. He spent time studying Arabic at a monastery and a period living with the Bedouin. He also travelled, briefly, with French spies traversing the Red Sea\(^{14}\).

The account of his voyage, when it appeared, was an immediate success. With one volume devoted to Egypt and another to Syria, those volumes in turn were divided into sections devoted to the ‘etat physique’ and the ‘etat politique’ of the respective regions. Within those sections Volney analysed everything from the quality of the soil, to prevailing winds, water, ethnic composition, religious beliefs, judicial practice, tax policy and sexual customs. The book gave him access to a range of elite scientific and philosophical circles and helped him to secure election to the Estates General in 1789. Its combination of geographic and ethnographic description with political philosophy and something approximating reconnaissance would become typical of much French voyage literature during the Revolutionary years.

In addition to providing a model for the ‘scientific’ approach to voyage literature that Volney envisaged as the future of the genre, the *Voyage* has long been regarded by historians as a kind of script for Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign of 1798\(^{15}\). In truth, Volney argued explicitly against a French attempt to colonise Egypt in a pamphlet published in 1788, on both humanitarian and strategic grounds. Indeed he remained ambivalent about colonial projects throughout his life\(^{16}\). But the *Voyage* contained much information that Napoleon’s armies found useful on subjects ranging from

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\(^{14}\) Fonds Archives étrangères B/I/113, (Correspondance consulaire – Alexandrie 1783-1787), t. XIV, l. 54. This letter is dated 28 August 1783. For Volney’s itinerary see GAULMIER, *Idéologue Volney, op. cit.*, p. 64-77.


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crops, to military organisation, to the social resentments within Egyptian society. The text also combined a critique of Ottoman rule with a faith in the social potential of the Arab world that had strong echoes in the legitimating rhetoric of Napoleon’s campaign. Indeed Volney claimed optimistically that « nothing would be easier than to create a great political and religious revolution in Asia »17. In matters of both form and ideology, then, Volney’s Voyage of 1787 might be considered a kind of prototype for Revolutionary voyaging avant-la-lettre.

In comparison, Volney’s subsequent Tableau on America was an incomplete and fragmentary work. Suffering from ill-health, and concerned about the political climate in France, Volney’s text focussed largely on the ‘etat physique’ of the country. He wrote to Thomas Jefferson suggesting that the book ‘contains little, if anything, on political matters’, adding ‘it would be necessary to say too much or too little’18. Freedom of speech did not necessarily improve after 1789. Despite Volney’s reticence, however, his book still managed to irritate both American and French authorities19. Fragments of the larger work also survive in manuscript20. Together these contain enough to enable observations upon continuity and change in authorial perspective.

Of particular interest, for my purposes, Volney’s Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte displays, in various ways, a more radical and ambitious politics than its successor. Despite a vigorous critique of Ottoman society and many pejorative remarks upon the state of the Empire, the Voyage contains, at its core, an optimistic faith in the ultimate unity of humanity and the possibilities for human improvement through the application of reason to social life. The book about the United States is, in contrast, more cautious, more diffident about cultural difference, and more inclined to recognise the stubborn obstacles to the realisation of utopian schemes for social regeneration. Volney’s political ideals did not change very much between the two works, in my view, but his perspective on the prospects for their

(17) VOLNEY, Voyage, p. 300.
(20) Morgan Library and Museum, New York, MA 8013.
imminent realisation, and perhaps on the best means of pursuing them, changed considerably.

One way of explaining this pattern, in the case of Volney, is through personal biography. The first book was produced by a young man who had spent his early 20s in the Enlightened salons of Paris, catching the intellectual ferment. After publication of his book he supported the Revolution with ardour and laboured for its success. By the time he arrived in America in the wake of the Terror, his perspective had changed. His first trip had been undertaken, he said « with that alacrity, that confidence in others and in oneself, which inspires youth ». When he departed for America in 1795, in contrast, he did so ‘with the disgust and indifference that result from the spectacle and the experience of injustice and persecution’. ‘Sad about the past, anxious about the future’ he claimed, ‘I went with defiance to a free people, to see if a sincere friend of that profaned liberty, might find for his old age an asylum of peace for which Europe no longer offered him hope’.

Yet while Volney hoped to find a sanctuary of liberty in the United States, he viewed it warily and left it with a troubled soul. His return to France initially raised his spirits. He admired the young Napoleon and supported his rise to power. By the time Volney was publishing his book in 1803, however, the two had fallen out. Napoleon had marginalised the representative assemblies, censored the press, resumed foreign war, signed a Concordat with the Pope, and attempted to reimpose slavery in Saint-Domingue. For all these reasons, in 1803 Volney was a bitter man. He would attempt to resign from the Senate on the day of Napoleon’s coronation.

Clearly, this biography matters when we compare the two texts. At a higher level, however, the contrast between Volney’s pre-revolutionary travel writings and his revolutionary ones reflects a broader pattern. In part this is because the biography itself is representative. Volney was far from the only idealist of the 1780s to feel chastened by the early 1800s. More generally, however, many of the contrasts between Volney’s two texts reflect wider tendencies in anthropological discourse in France, and even in Europe, between the 1780s and the early 1800s. These include a hardening of attitudes towards so-called ‘primitive peoples’, a greater sense of the tenacity

(21) VOLNEY, Tableau, op. cit., p. 21.
(22) BOSSANGE, « Notice sur VOLNEY », op. cit., p. xlii-xliii.
of cultural difference and local mores, and a decline in the optimistic, if sometimes incipiently imperialistic, universalism characteristic of certain strands of Enlightenment thought. These tendencies extended much wider than France, though in many places in Europe they had some connection with the dynamics of the Revolutionary wars. In France at least, it is clear, they were linked closely to the challenges and frustrations of governance during the 1790s: to the ongoing parochialism of the French provinces as seen from Paris; to the failure to ingrain republican culture; and to the dynamics of factional struggle within the Revolutionary elite during and after the Terror.

The differences between the two texts can be difficult to perceive at first glance. The two works share a similar analytical and impersonal tone. This results, in both cases, in an apparent cynicism in relation to the host society. In relation to the ‘orient’ there had been, throughout the eighteenth century, a growing fascination with the region that had manifested itself in everything from pseudo-oriental literature and painting to fashions and decorative arts. A range of previous voyagers had catered to this taste. From the beginning of his text Volney distinguished himself from such commentators. He claimed he had forbidden himself all ‘imaginative tableaux’, asserting that ‘the genre of voyages belongs to history and not to the romance’. He adopted a stance systematically opposed to exoticism and the picturesque. This determination to demystify his topic has not always served Volney well with modern readers. His writing lacks the aesthetic cosmopolitanism of contemporaries such as Claude-Etiéenne Savary. A contemporary reviewer suggested that where ‘M. Savary makes one wish to live in Egypt’ Mr Volney ‘is almost in tears on the fate of the unfortunates condemned to live there’.

(23) This is most strikingly illustrated by the romantic current in Germany, particularly after 1800, with its celebration of unique national Kultur, which was at least in part a reaction to the Revolutionary wars. See Pauline KLEINGE LD, ‘Six varieties of cosmopolitanism in late eighteenth-century Germany’, History of Ideas, 60(3), 1999, p. 505-524; Azade Seyhan, ‘What is Romanticism and where did it come from?’, in Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 5-7.


(27) Journal de Paris, 8 May 1787, p. 547.
Volney sought, however, to be cosmopolitan in other ways. He conceived his work as an intervention in period debates about human difference, human history and the art of government. European views of the Near East had been entangled with these issues for centuries. From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, discussion in France was particularly shaped by the success of the Baron de Montesquieu’s *De l’Esprit des lois* (1748). Amongst its many influences upon European political culture, this book had fostered a passionate debate which made so-called ‘oriental character’ central to broader conjecture about the possibilities and limitations of human development. By renewing Aristotle’s claim that the inhabitants of Asia were immutably destined for political despotism and civil slavery, Montesquieu made it critical to subsequent philosophers interested in establishing the possibility of adapting different forms of government to different nations. The social analysis in the *Voyage* was conceived largely as a meditation upon this debate. Philosophically and politically, its most striking feature is that, despite a close interest in matters of geography and climate, the text promotes a strongly universalist conception of human nature. Volney claimed that ‘the human heart is everywhere moved by the same forces’. It was driven by an ineradicable ‘desire for well-being’. He accepted the convention that the Ottoman Empire was a ‘despotic’ state. But where Montesquieu claimed that the primary cause of despotism was the dilating effect of heat upon the nerves, which induced laxity and servility, Volney cited the great civilisations of Asia - the Assyrians, Persians, Phoenicians, Palmyrians, Jews and a host of others - as evidence of the energy and capacity of so-called ‘orientals’. Indeed he claimed that Egypt was the fountainhead of all human civilisation and it had been, in its earliest forms, black African. He lamented that ‘this race of black men, today our slaves and the objects of our contempt, is the same race to which we owe our arts, our sciences, even the use of language’.

(29) VOLNEY, *Voyage*, op. cit., p. 526.
Volney’s text also goes beyond conventional eighteenth-century accounts of the despotic empire of the Turks in other ways. Its critique of Ottoman rule is supplemented and bolstered by strikingly admiring accounts of a range of peoples of the Levant, particularly the religious minorities of Syria and the Bedouin populations of Arabs, Turkmans and Kurds. The purpose of these accounts varied. Sometimes they sought to illustrate particular theses about the links between terrain, mode of life and social formation. Sometimes they highlight political issues – the importance of private property, the destructive effects of its unequal distribution, the necessity of civil equality, the noxious influence of superstition etc. The intent, throughout, was to highlight principles of government that could be applied more broadly. Yet the core of the work is really a remarkably simple theory of history that contained a direct political message. It contends that, over the long term, the strength and prosperity of a society are linked to the justice of its internal organisation. Misrule is the primary cause of popular misery and popular misery leads, sooner or later, to the fall of empires. Volney was certain that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was imminent, and he looked forward to that event with enthusiasm.

It is not hard to see why this kind of analysis would have been attractive to those who participated in the French invasion under Napoleon. But the theory served other purposes as well. For all Volney’s critique of the way in which voyage literature was distorted to cater to metropolitan interests, his book was written with one eye firmly on Europe. It ends with a contrast between the wealth of modern Europe and the contemporary misery of Asia. ‘If, at one time, the states of Asia enjoyed that same splendour as Europe does now’ Volney wrote, ‘who can guarantee that one day the states of Europe will not experience the same fate’. The way to prevent that fate was to learn the lessons of history. ‘From this point of view’, Volney claimed, ‘Turkey is a very instructive country’. It showed, above all, that ‘the abuse of authority, by provoking the misery of individuals, becomes ruinous to the power of a state’. Within a few years Volney would mount the barricades in Paris, declaiming against the despotism of his own government.

When we compare Volney’s later voyage to the United States with his earlier expedition, there are clear continuities. Despite Volney’s

contemplation of long-term resettlement, his voyage to the United States, like his voyage to the Middle East, sits ambiguously between private travel and service to the French state. In the wake of a dispiriting period as Agent-en-mission during the civil war in the Vendée in 1792, in which he lamented the excesses of both sides, Volney had sought a diplomatic post without success\(^{35}\). He had received approval, however, to undertake a voyage to a destination of his choice as an observer for the National Convention\(^{36}\). Having settled upon the United States, the project had been forestalled by Volney’s arrest. Despite the improvement of his career prospects after Thermidor, he decided to proceed with his original plans and cross the Atlantic. For the duration of his voyage Volney maintained regular contact with the French government\(^{37}\). Over the course of his sojourn, he wrote more than once seeking assistance with his costs, citing the potential benefits of his observations for both the Government and the Institut National\(^{38}\). But he fell out with French agents, particularly the ambassador Pierre-Auguste Adet. His correspondence is scathing about the conduct of French bureaucrats in America, and critical about wider failures of French policy in the Western hemisphere – both colonial and diplomatic\(^{39}\). As with Volney’s voyage to the Levant he devoted time upon his arrival to studying the local language, this time in Philadelphia. He eventually explored most of the coastal states from Massachusetts to the Carolinas, visiting Thomas Jefferson at Monticello and traversing the inland frontier as far as the Mississippi and Michigan\(^{40}\). He made time to visit the remote French settlements of Post-Vincennes and Gallipolis, destination of the ill-fated settlers of the Sioto scheme of 1791\(^{41}\). It is clear that throughout these travels he still saw voyaging as an adjunct to political philosophy. He set out to mimic in his later work the method he had employed in the Near East – despite the abridged nature of his final publication.


\(^{39}\) Volney to La Révellière-Lépeaux, 23 January 1797, Mathiez, ‘Lettres de Volney’, *op cit.*, p. 178, 182-3

\(^{40}\) For the itinereary see Gaulmier, *Idéologue Volney*, *op cit.*, p. 358.

\(^{41}\) Volney, *Tableau*, *op cit.*, p. 301-308.
Despite Volney’s early hopes, his political assessment of the USA was ambivalent. His impulse to demythologise led him to attack the idealised depictions of America that had circulated widely in France both before and during the Revolution – most famously those of Crèvecoeur and Brissot, as well as those who sold shares in the Sioto scheme. While he admired many of the founding fathers, particularly Franklin and Jefferson, he felt that America retained many vices of old-world politics. Most of the comparative advantages enjoyed by American citizens were fortuitous accidents – products, not of legislative wisdom, but of the easy availability of land and the high price of labour. Americans were addicted to fashionable trinkets and rancorous civil litigation in a manner that threatened the development of a durable civic culture. Indeed he claimed that ‘lawyers are becoming the priests of this country’. His unpublished manuscript also contains long passages attacking slavery, both for its inhumanity and its counter-productive economic effects. It proposes inter-marriage between white and black in the interests of building a colour-blind republic in the Americas, noting the widespread visibility of mixed-race children, despite colonists’ claims of revulsion at the idea. Volney also complained about the weak coffee, strong tea, and prodigious consumption of pork and butter at breakfast – all of which produced indigestion and a range of more serious maladies.

Volney claimed that the United States was fundamentally divided about its political direction and ultimate form. As factions polarised in the second half of the 1790s, he interpreted the situation as a quarrel between ‘English principles’ and ‘French principles’ for the future of the continent. In 1803, he would summarise the situation as ‘the clash of two contrary opinions, labelled Republican and Federalist’. The latter insisted on the pre-eminence of ‘monarchical, or more accurately despotic, government’. It aspired to ‘arbitrary and absolute power’. It was premised on ‘the ignorance, the passions and the turbulence of the multitude’. Republican philosophy, on the other hand, maintained ‘that absolute power is a radical principle of destruction and disorder’. It insisted that ‘if the multitude is ignorant and troublesome, it is because it has been taught to be so by such governments’.
It proposed as remedy that ‘in supposing that men are born vicious, one cannot improve them but with a regime of reason and justice’. It maintained that the latter could not be obtained without knowledge, and that such knowledge demanded ‘study, work, contradictory debate, all things which suppose independence of spirit and freedom of opinion’.

It is unnecessary to point out the inadequacy of this sketch as an account of American political debate in the second half of the 1790s. These words were published, however, in Paris at a time when the French press had been silenced, the Class of Political and Moral Sciences at the Institut National disbanded, and the representative bodies in government purged. It is not difficult to read here a polemic directed as much against the French First Consul – soon to be Emperor – as against the American Federalists. Some pages later Volney noted that things in America had improved under Jefferson since his visit, adding pointedly that he wished to ‘render homage to the institution that, at this moment, most honours the United States, freedom of the press and of opinion’.

Collectively, these remarks suggest considerable continuity in Volney’s political vision over time, although in making these assessments there are strong textual hints that Volney was more conscious than he might once have been of the difficulties of establishing a new polity: promoting industriousness without avarice and rivalry; reconciling competing visions of what a republic in the modern world might look like. Where Volney’s work on America seems to contrast most strikingly from his earlier voyage, in particular, is in his treatment of indigenous Americans. The final section of Volney’s book is devoted to ‘les Indiens ou sauvages de l’Amerique du nord’. It occupies 70 pages. In comparison with his sympathetic account of both African slaves and the nomadic Bedouin of the Arabian Desert, Volney had little positive to say about the ‘savages’ of America. In part this difference may have been the result of ignorance. In Syria Volney had spent time living at a Bedouin camp in Gaza and spoke the language.

He lauded Bedouin hospitality and care for guests. He commended their social equality and culture of cooperation. Volney intended to repeat the exercise with a tribe in America, but he was discouraged from doing so by white settlers. These settlers informed him that there were no laws of

(50) VOLNEY, Tableau, op. cit., p. 25-6.
(51) Ibid., p. 28.
(52) VOLNEY, Voyage, op. cit., p. 275.
(53) Ibid. p. 275-98, esp. 296-98.
hospitality amongst the natives, that ‘their social state was a ferocious and brutal anarchy’. They told him stories of cannibalism, infanticide and euthanasia. Volney accepted these stories with little question. Historians have often noted the fact that colonial settlers tended to have harsher views of Indigenous populations than less materially-invested observers. Engaged in direct competition with these populations for land, settlers had little incentive to embrace the humanitarian nostrums of Christian philanthropists or reformist philosophers in Europe. But Volney’s willingness to accept these tales is striking, given both his habitual insistence on direct observation and his resolute critique of mainstream American views of Africans.

Volney did not suggest that the character of Native Americans was a product of biology. He regarded the pathologies, as he saw them, of traditional society as a consequence of necessity. The forests of America, and the absence of domesticable livestock, had been a disadvantage. The life of nomadic hunters, in contrast to that of pastoralists like the Bedouin, entailed a life of violence. They lived, often, on the edge of starvation. A hard life had made them hard.

Volney’s antipathy towards Native Americans also reflects wider political predilections. Despite his admiration for the Bedouin, he had always believed in the benefits of settled agriculture and private property, so long as they were regulated by policies designed to foster subdivision and limit inequality of wealth. To this extent Volney was, like many French Revolutionaries of his type, committed to the role of property in promoting social sentiment. We can see the centrality of the property question throughout Volney’s discussion of Native Americans. A significant part of that discussion recounts an interview with a chief of the Miami, Little Turtle, with whom he had developed a relationship while constructing

(54) Volney, Tableau, op. cit., p. 331-2.
(56) Volney, Tableau, op. cit., p. 343-5. For a wider context see Jacqueline Duverney-Bolens, ‘De la sensibilité des sauvages à l’époque romantique’, L’Homme, 145 (1998), p. 143-68. Volney had already compared the pastoralist mode of life favourably with the ‘ferocity’ of American ‘savages’ in the Voyage (op. cit., p. 295-6). It will be clear from what follows, however, how much the Revolution affected Volney’s later writing on the subject.
a vocabulary of the language. This man was Volney’s one real example of sustained personal interaction with an Indigenous American. Despite his general hostility to ‘savages’, Volney presented Little Turtle as a great warrior and chief, as well as a wise and thoughtful man. Volney praised him, above all, for his recognition of the inadequacies of the traditional lifestyle of his people. Little Turtle saw, readers are told, that the primary cause of Europeans’ power was the capacity of agriculture to feed immense populations upon little terrain. As a consequence, Little Turtle lamented, ‘they spread like oil on a blanket while we melt like snow before the spring sunshine’. He added that ‘if we do not change our ways, it is impossible that the race of red men will subsist’. Volney used this passage to highlight that this ‘savage’, ‘against the prejudices of his birth, his habits and his pride […] found himself conducted by the nature of things, to regard the cultivation of the earth as the basis of the social state’\(^{59}\). Volney did believe that Native Americans, like Africans, could have a real future within the United States if they could adapt to the mores of the colonists. His proposal was to settle them on land and to encourage smallholding, although he recognised that many would resist any such move\(^{60}\). It was a program for economic and social assimilation that he had previously proposed for the peasants of Brittany and Corsica\(^{61}\).

There is also a final factor that played a key role in Volney’s antipathy towards Indigenous American life. It relates, more immediately, to the factional politics of France and to the changes wrought by revolutionary experience. It relates, in particular, to the recent role in French history of the so-called ‘noble savage’. It is well known that the eighteenth century in Europe saw a widespread renaissance in the ancient practice of praising the simple life and natural manners of earlier times\(^{62}\). The Indigenous peoples of the so-called ‘new world’, whether in America or the Pacific, were often cast as exemplars of a golden age that had once belonged to all humanity. In France, this was typified, for example, by the explorer Louis-Antoine Bougainville’s wildly enthusiastic account of the people of Tahiti published

\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 357.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 350-1, 368.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 368-370 ; see also Constantin-François Volney, « Précis de l'état de la Corse » [1793] in Volney: Œuvres, op. cit., v. I, p. 625-34.

in 1771\textsuperscript{63}. It was intensified by the strategic use that Denis Diderot had made of that account in his fictional ‘Supplement’ to Bougainville’s voyage\textsuperscript{64}. Diderot’s Tahiti was a world of human freedom and fulfilment, in harmony with nature, both physical and human. It was also a stick with which to beat Bourbon France and the Catholic faithful for their hypocrisy, artificiality and self-induced misery – particularly in matters of sexual morality. Despite Volney’s hostility towards the idealisations of travellers, his own account of the noble simplicity of some of the rural populations of the Levant had touched upon this kind of literary trope. He had remarked that there are ‘few civilised nations that have a morality as generally estimable as the Bedouin Arabs’, and he suspected their virtue might be attached to the ‘pastoral life’\textsuperscript{65}. He praised the ‘republican spirit’ of the Druze\textsuperscript{66}. He admired the simple theology of the Motouâlis, a small Shiite people living in the mountains of Lebanon. Indeed he represented them virtually as Deists who believed that ‘God does not act but by rules of justice that conform to human reason’ and that ‘he does not find bad in man that which he himself created’\textsuperscript{67}. Like any good philosophe of the eighteenth century, Volney had shown himself willing to praise other societies to make a domestic political point.

Perhaps the most historically important, and certainly the most famous, use of the ‘noble savage’ for this kind of critical purpose in France involved Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose depiction of early man as a creature of natural goodness and independence provided a foil for a sustained attack on the process of civilisation and the pretensions of modern philosophy and science\textsuperscript{68}. Rousseau’s story of human history was a prolonged secular version of the fall. During the Revolution, and particularly during the years of Robespierre’s ascendency throughout 1793–94, Rousseau’s critique of the failure of Enlightened philosophy to produce morality or happiness had been appropriated by some of the most aggressive supporters of a radically reconfigured republic. It had been used to justify the dissolution of scientific academies, the purging of the bureaucracy, and a rhetorical assault upon the probity of much of the early Revolutionary intellectual

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{63} Louis-Antoine Bougainville, \textit{Voyage autour du monde} [1771].
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Denis Diderot’s \textit{Supplément au voyage de Bougainville} [1772] was first published in the journal \textit{Correspondance littéraire}.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Volney, \textit{Voyage}, p. 300.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p. 344.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p. 350.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Jean-Jacques Rousseau, \textit{Discours sur l’origine et fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes} [1755].
\end{itemize}
elite. With the fall of Robespierre, the remnants of that elite began to regroup. And it is during this period that most of the scientific expeditions of the Revolutionary era were conducted. Within these expeditions there was a marked decline in the general desire to praise Indigenous people or to compare their life favourably with the life of European ‘civilisation’.

The ‘noble savage’ did not entirely disappear at this time, of course. The manner in which individual French observers responded to Indigenous peoples was always shaped by a range of factors. It is nonetheless true that the ‘noble savage’ went into marked decline in France after 1795, once he became suspect as a Trojan horse for Jacobin terrorism. More broadly, from this time, many adherents of Revolutionary politics sought to divest the Revolution of its early neo-classical impulses, to reject conceptions of the Revolution as a return to the purity of the ancient republics or a classical Golden Age. Instead they sought to cast it as a step forwards in the march of modern reason away from the barbarism of the past – including the very recent past. Both of these patterns are visible in Volney’s text. In the split between ancients and moderns amongst the Revolutionary generation, Volney had always been a modern, although he was sometimes an ambivalent one. But his hostility to ancient models increased with the passage of time. His section on ‘les sauvages américains’ is punctuated with asides comparing them to the Greeks of the heroic age. Both, he claimed, were bellicose and cruel. Both were destructively fatalistic. He cited Thucydides to highlight the similarities. He compared Amerindian life philosophy with stoicism in order to condemn both. He accused the Americans, like the Greeks, of pederasty. For Volney, neither ancients nor ‘savages’ could serve as a political model for the future.

It is also clear that Volney’s account of Native Americans was written, quite particularly, in the shadow of Rousseau. More accurately, it

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(69) Thus François Péron’s transition from Rousseauist to defender of civilisation, between 1800 and 1807 followed a somewhat different chronology and intellectual logic. Jean-Luc Chappey, « François Péron et la question de la civilisation aux antipodes », Annales historiques de la Révolution française, 375 (2014), p. 139-59.


(71) Volney, Tableau, op. cit., p. 382, 387.

(72) Ibid., p. 292.

(73) Volney had already denounced the classical fixations of the early years of the Revolution in a series of lectures on History at the Ecole Normale in 1794, condemning the « modern Lycurguses » who « spoke to us of bread and iron » when « the iron of pikes produces only blood ». Constantin-François Volney, Leçons d’histoires in Volney: Œuvres, op. cit., t. 1, p. 606.
was written in the shadow of the Jacobin version of Rousseau\(^{74}\). Volney’s account of ‘les sauvages’ contains an extended attack on the famous ‘citizen of Geneva’. It contrasts him specifically with Little Turtle. Where the latter was a ‘public man’ ‘well qualified to judge the advantages and inconveniences of each model of life’, Rousseau ‘never managed public affairs and could not even manage his own’. He had created a ‘world of abstractions’ and lived ‘almost as much a stranger to the society of his birth as to that of the savages’\(^{75}\). Volney even attempted to re-write Rousseau’s critique of European civilisation as he believed it should have been done – pointing out that true ‘civilisation’ implied a just social order, built upon regular law, the recognition of rights and a process of public enlightenment\(^{76}\). Volney believed, in 1803, that such a state had yet to be found. When Volney labelled the social order of Indigenous Americans a ‘democracy so turbulent, and so terrorist, that one can well call it a real and frightening anarchy’ the domestic target of his polemic was crudely unveiled\(^{77}\).

The general decline in the literary reputation of Indigenous peoples in Europe between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is quite well known. It is clear that it has long-term structural causes – both material and intellectual. These include, amongst other things, the intensification of imperialism and a growing biologism that accompanied the disciplinary fragmentation of the human sciences\(^{78}\). In France, however, that process was hastened by the internal dynamics of the Revolution. Even a figure such as Volney, who was deeply committed to late-Enlightenment notions of human universalism and perfectibility, and who was critical of many of the imperial practices of his age, found himself contributing to the general transformation. The ‘noble savage’ had been an icon of progressive

\(^{74}\) Rousseau’s legacy in the Revolutionary era was, of course, more complex than this. Robespierre’s opponents among the so-called ‘Girondins’ were often quite as influenced by Rousseau as their adversary, albeit in different ways. For Volney that subtlety of history never meant very much.

\(^{75}\) Volney, Tableau, op. cit., p. 358-9.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., p. 360-1.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., p. 368. Italics in original. For an alternative view, emphasizing Volney’s consistent ethnographic ‘realism’ as the cause of his antipathy towards native Americans, see Denise Brahimi, ‘Volney chez les sauvages: un idéologue contre l’idéologie’, dans Jean Roussel (dir.), L’Héritage des Lumières: Volney et les idéologues, Angers, Université d’Angers, 1988, p. 73-81.

politics in the latter years of the *ancien régime*. He became, in part at least, collateral damage in the factional conflicts of Revolutionary France.

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